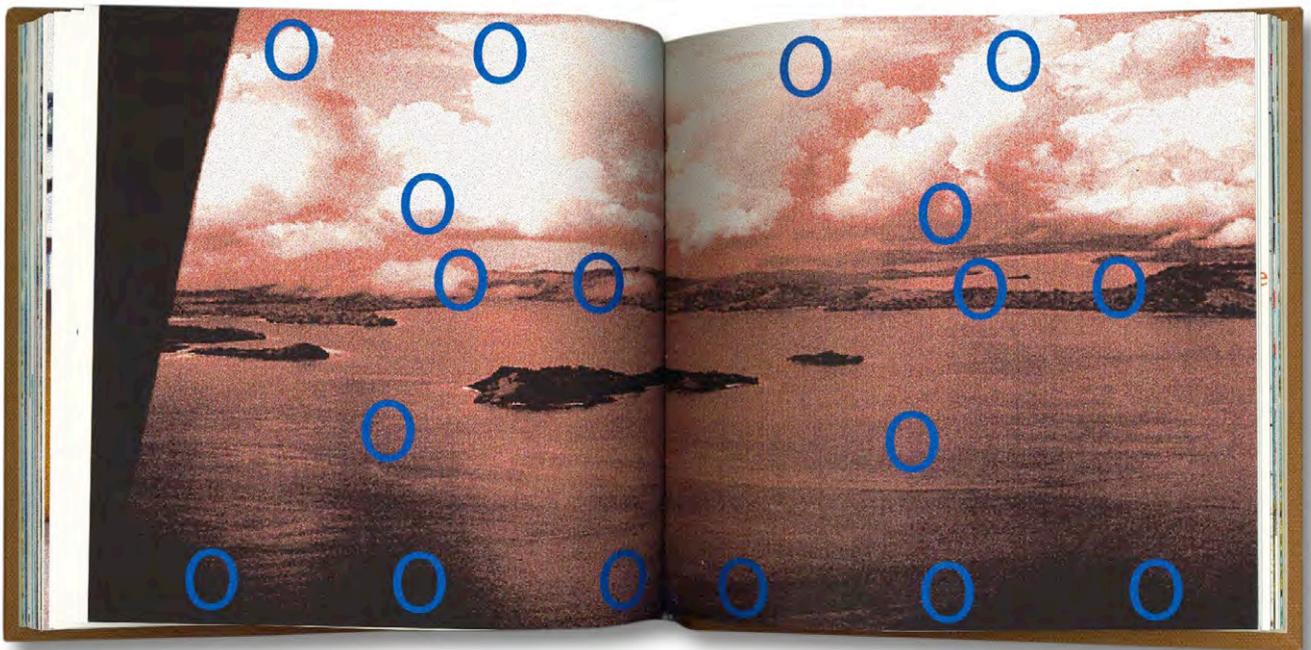




Jan Davis, *SOLOMON*, 1995



Jan Davis, *SOLOMON*, 1995

No More Happy Ever Afters

Lyn Ashby

In early 2016, I was a Siganto Research Fellow at the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia.

The Fellowship allowed me to look into the artists' books collection in the Australian Library of Art and consider an issue which, despite having been the topic of enquiry many times before – narrative in the artist's book – I felt was still open and still changing. Perhaps more than ever.

From the start it seemed important to conceive the issue in terms of the capacity of the particular qualities of the artist's book to make certain types of stories (or perhaps other communication forms) more or less possible. These stories (and all our different types of stories) are templates of sensibility that open or close doors in our intellectual, psychological and sensory lives. It became clear that my true line of enquiry concerned my suspicion that the artist's book, for a variety of reasons, often embodies a uniquely modern template of sensibility that can offer access to possibilities of thinking and feeling that go beyond the limitations of conventional narrative at a time when we dearly need it.

For the purposes of this research question I inclined towards books that required what we might call 'reading' in its widest sense. It is clear that book sculptures and book objects have their own enormous value in the book arts world. But for the purposes of this enquiry I left them aside.

Behind this research, as a background measure, I tried to bear in mind a notion of conventional or traditional narrative. Perhaps this is one extreme of the narrative spectrum, the Hollywood version, perhaps. I thought of this as a progressive (or linear), cause & effect sequence of events with (more or less) a beginning, middle and end, involving plot, characters, environments, moods and settings, all of which tend to lead to a resolution or some kind of moral, social or psychological conclusion.

But on a more abstract level we could say that narrative is the proposing of patterns of meaning with webs of significant connections. This is surely a format of being-in-the-world that has underwritten human identity and purpose, both cultural and personal, to which we have been in thrall forever. I found it useful to remember that our ancient European ancestors looked into the night sky, and patched together meaning by associating stars that were actually, in many cases, millions of light years apart. From this, I was reminded of the pull of story, and our need for narrative explanation. There is a parallel here, of course, for many the indigenous peoples of the world, and their night-sky myth-making.

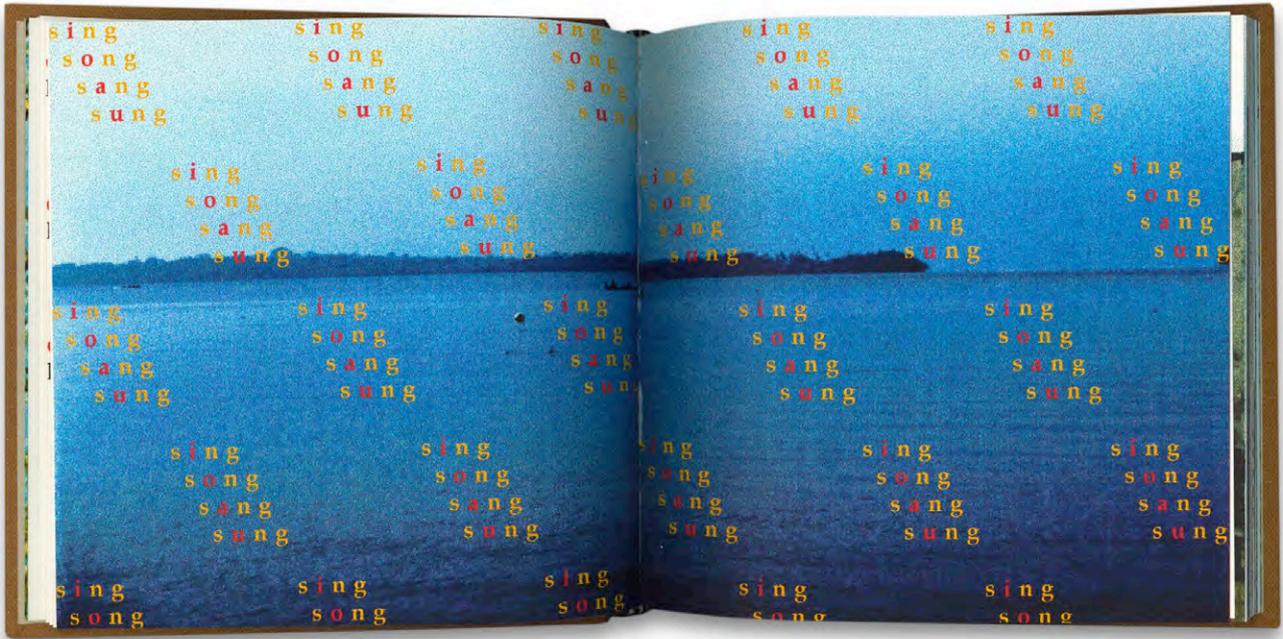
Our ancestors' constellations, the Crab, the Bull, the Water-bearer etc., were the front for a whole system of stories which helped explain everything for them: time, purpose, existence itself. We might regard this as mere ancient myth, thinking that our stories (and constellations) are more rational, local and personal. But our stories today serve a similar purpose for us and are just as problematic in any claim as ultimate truth.

Why is all this important? Although the answer to this is obvious, I had to regularly remind myself: the qualities of our stories, our narratives, their paradigmatic forms, offer possibilities (or not) in the modelling of our lives, inner and outer. In the face of increasing media exploitation, there is, it seemed to me, a greater urgency in considering how we wield our stories and who wields them. I found myself wondering if there has not been a debasement in our understanding or application of narrative in recent times. Or if it hasn't had its time, or if its vocabulary hasn't ossified, or if it hasn't too easily and often been manipulated. Everything now seems to be 'narrative'. And when the advertising industry co-opts an idea, we know that some devaluation has occurred at the heart of that idea.

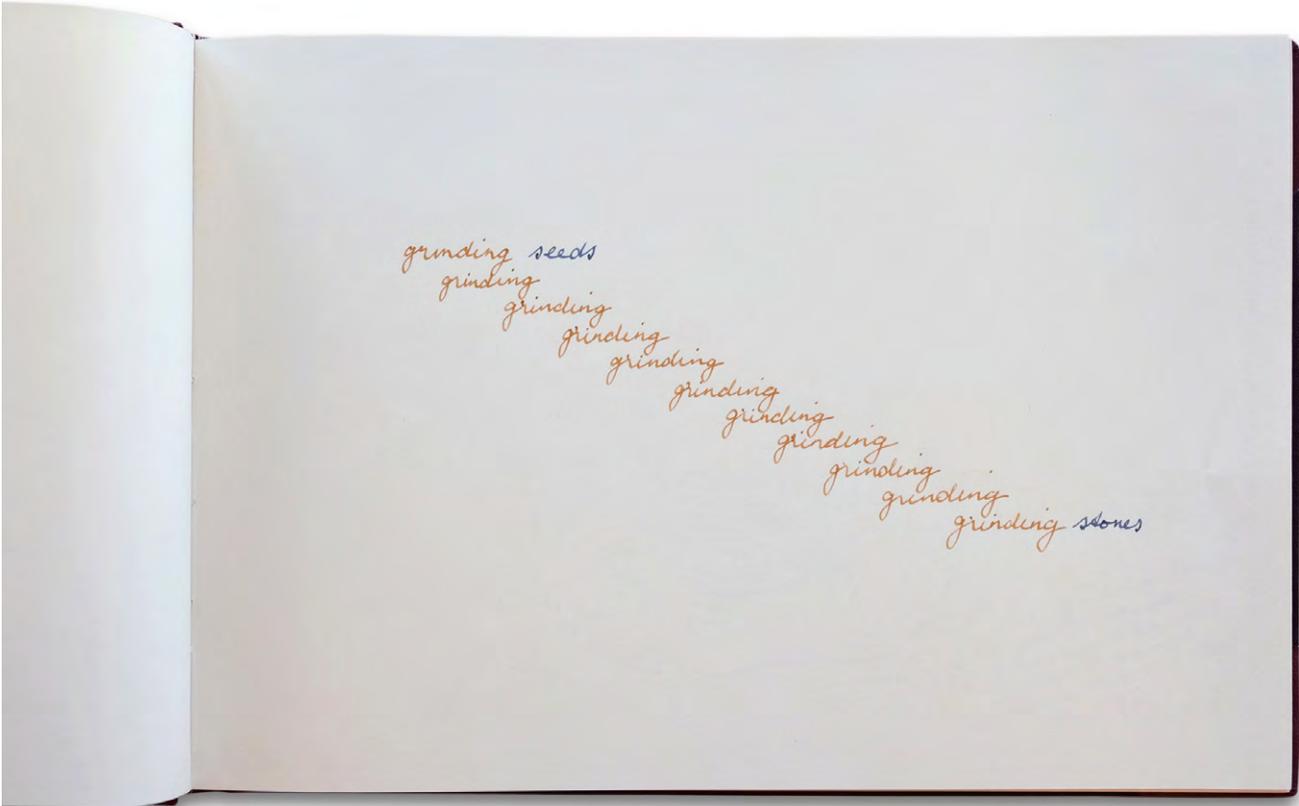
I wondered too if we are not now subject to a widespread infantilisation in relation to story and narrative, as if we are children under the spell of the storyform always wanting bedtime stories to console and explain. This seems to be one of the roles of the media today.

But if not narrative, then what? We use other forms to propose ideas, explore themes, and develop propositions although we seem to acknowledge and understand those forms to a much lesser degree. In our normal lives today our stories are embedded in mediums and each medium (artistic, cultural etc.) represents a particular ensemble of unique qualities that make types of story, or other forms, more-or-less possible. That is, different media can generate different types of stories, which in turn offer (sometimes subtly) different blueprints for our moral sense of who we are. One of those cultural, artistic mediums is, of course, the artist's book. So what type of template of sensibility does the artist's book offer?

My own strong suspicion has always been that many of those who are attracted to make artists' books, (I count myself among them) want to *not* tell stories. Clearly some book artists do. But if my suspicion is correct many book artists may want to propose ideas, explore themes and develop propositions but they want to do these things beyond or without the limitations of the conventions of traditional storytelling. And significantly, they want to do this experimental and transgressive thing, (to *not* tell stories) right in the traditional home of conventional storytelling: the book itself.



Jan Davis, SOLOMON, 1995



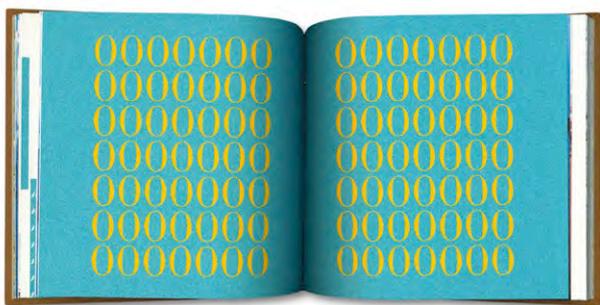
Jan Davis, *Drawing on the Ground*, 2015

This seems to be a desire to take the book and story (often while acknowledging the rich history and heritage there) into new, experimental territory.

When we look into the particular ensemble of unique qualities that is the artist's book, we begin to understand why this medium seems to promote such experiments. On the pages of artists' books, we find a wide mix of components – text, image, text as image, image as text, book-page space itself as image and so on – and all these components can be juxtaposed or collaged in a mosaic or field form, with little obvious explanation for a single interpretation.¹ Because of this, many of the conventional strategies for generating narrative meaning – linearity, sequentiality, hierarchy and causation – are often sidelined, subverted or abandoned. Instead a book might do its work by orchestrating a series of sensory affects. This changes everything: the reader's relation to the material, the whole idea and expectation of narrative and thus the nature of reading itself. The question of how a work is to be comprehended often becomes the real story of a work.

In this way, an artist's book can do its work – perhaps to orbit or present a theme, topic or issue – without prescription, reduction or simple story resolution. I came to call this 'open narrative'.

How does this work on the pages of artists' books? I set out to explore some of these varied, unprescribed ways of creating coherence and meaning in artists' books beyond traditional narrative form, with a special eye to the work of Siganto Foundation Creative Fellows who made their books at the State Library of Queensland in recent years.



Jan Davis, *SOLOMON*, 1995

Jan Davis was a Siganto Creative Fellow in 2014/15 for which she made the work *Drawing on the Ground*. An earlier work of Davis', however, set up some useful and relevant ideas which this later work used and developed. The multiple-volume work, *SOLOMON* made in 1996 (the early days of bubble jet printing) comprises a different small book for each of the letters in the name of *SOLOMON*². Each is separate like an island but also part

of a whole. Immediately we have a material, bibliographic metaphor for how we might read this work.

Each of the books foregrounds an aspect of the work's themes, suggesting different angles of approach. Reading *SOLOMON* often feels like a process of multiple triangulations, as if meaning is subtly being built up or mapped out, or, even being woven from variations of recurring emblematic images and word patterns, that appear and re-appear. These separate idea threads are intertwined into a fabric of meaning.



Jan Davis, *SOLOMON*, 1995

Sometimes these patterned images resonate at various levels, simultaneously invoking islands in the seas, songs and sounds sung into the physical air, and material patterns of cohesion and disruption in cultural space.

There are various versions of patterns of "O"s that invoke some of the works' central themes. They are golden islands in aqua seas. They are coconuts (that with the palm trees, supplied most of the needs of the traditional peoples). And they are stacks or rows of coins, the booty squeezed opportunistically from the nut and the islands by colonisers. Visually these patterns suggest textiles, and we are offered literal images of woven materials as further metaphor for this reading process. Although in this weaving of words and images we sense its coherent fabric of meaning, such a process disallows any reduction or conclusion as we might find in a conventional storyform.

Davis made *Drawing on the Ground* as a 2015 Siganto Creative Fellowship, and this work occasionally addresses similar themes, and uses a parallel method. This quiet, simple (but not simplistic) book concerns the material organisation that goes into the physical labour required to live in the sometimes harsh environment of Australia, both for white and indigenous people alike. This order or organisation is sometimes visually represented by the order of textual / textural graphic word-weaving and concrete-poetic-page play, reminiscent of some pages of *SOLOMON*. And both these books, each in its way, offer homage to Mallarmé's word-page inventions. This is just one way an artist's book can weave or pattern its propositions.



Julie Barratt, *Blair Athol Recut*, 2016



Ana Paula Estrada, *Memorandum*, 2016

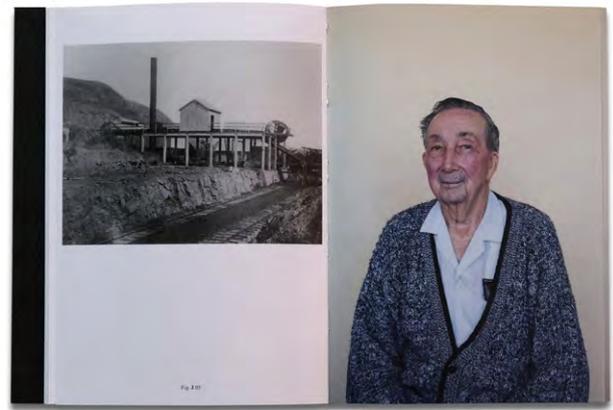
Other artists' books do their work by invoking a sensory response to a particular conjunction of different materials or forms. Such is the case with Julie Barratt's *Blair Athol Recut*, a work made on a 2015 Siganto Creative Fellowship. This work is about the displacement of an entire town in the late 1970s to make way for mining concerns. It comprises a variety of forms. There are two books: a large one that visually simulates the obliteration of the town as layout drawings, page-by-page, disappear into an inky blackness; and a smaller book that documents details and feelings about the displacement in a more idiosyncratic way. There is also an audio component (the reading of a poetic response to the town's displacement) and an array of small glass test tubes of objects each with tiny residual reminders of the once living town. This assortment of objects is housed in a fittingly tomb-like black box.

To read this work is as I imagine how it might be to pick through the rubble of a demolished home and its scattered fragments. It seems appropriate that this very real-world material event, the forced relocation of an entire town and its people, was explored by this jagged mix of different physical, sense objects. The various predictable and unpredictable feelings aroused by this jumble – terror, disbelief, anger, sadness, nostalgia – and one Julie identified as *solastalgia* ('the psychic or existential distress brought on by environmental changes, such as mining'), arise in all directions and must cohere (or not) in some personal way, different for each of us.³

Storytelling is sometimes a process of inducement into an experience that parallels a work's theme or topic. Ana Paula Estrada made *Memorandum* as a 2015-16 Siganto Creative Fellow, and about this book Ana Paula writes: 'Memorandum is a book that uses photography, oral history and collection material to recount stories. It is a book about things that were remembered, photographs that were carefully stored and conversations that must never be forgotten.'⁴ It does indeed do these things and especially in the context of ageing, but it seems to achieve something else also.

Its core structure is a set of sequences of photographic portraits that appear to capture (or represent) the actual moment of recollection. In their very subtle differences, especially in eye movements, the portraits suggest a slow-moving, deep time and space of the act of remembering.

John Berger suggested that story is shelter against oblivion, forgetfulness and everyday indifference. To recall stories, or moments of stories, is to create this shelter, the need for which Ana Paula hinted in that phrase, 'conversations that must never be forgotten.'



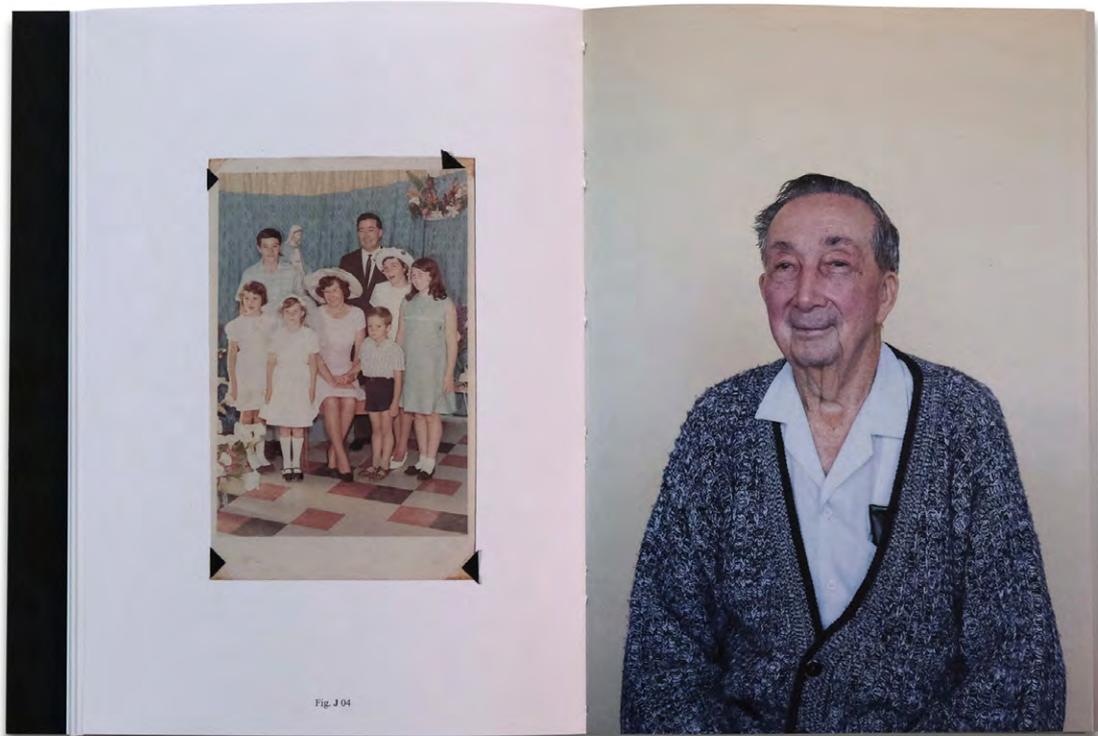
Ana Paula Estrada, *Memorandum*, 2016

But I think this work is not just a shelter for preserving memories, but is more about the preserving, acknowledging, and perhaps celebrating of the actual act of remembering, as if remembering itself must not be forgotten. This subtle sequencing of portraits suggests the contrast of two types or movements of time. It presents, or simulates, the intensity of the moment of recollection which suggests a vertical depth, timelessness and presence, and contrasts this against the otherwise relentless, dissipative, horizontal flow of normal time.

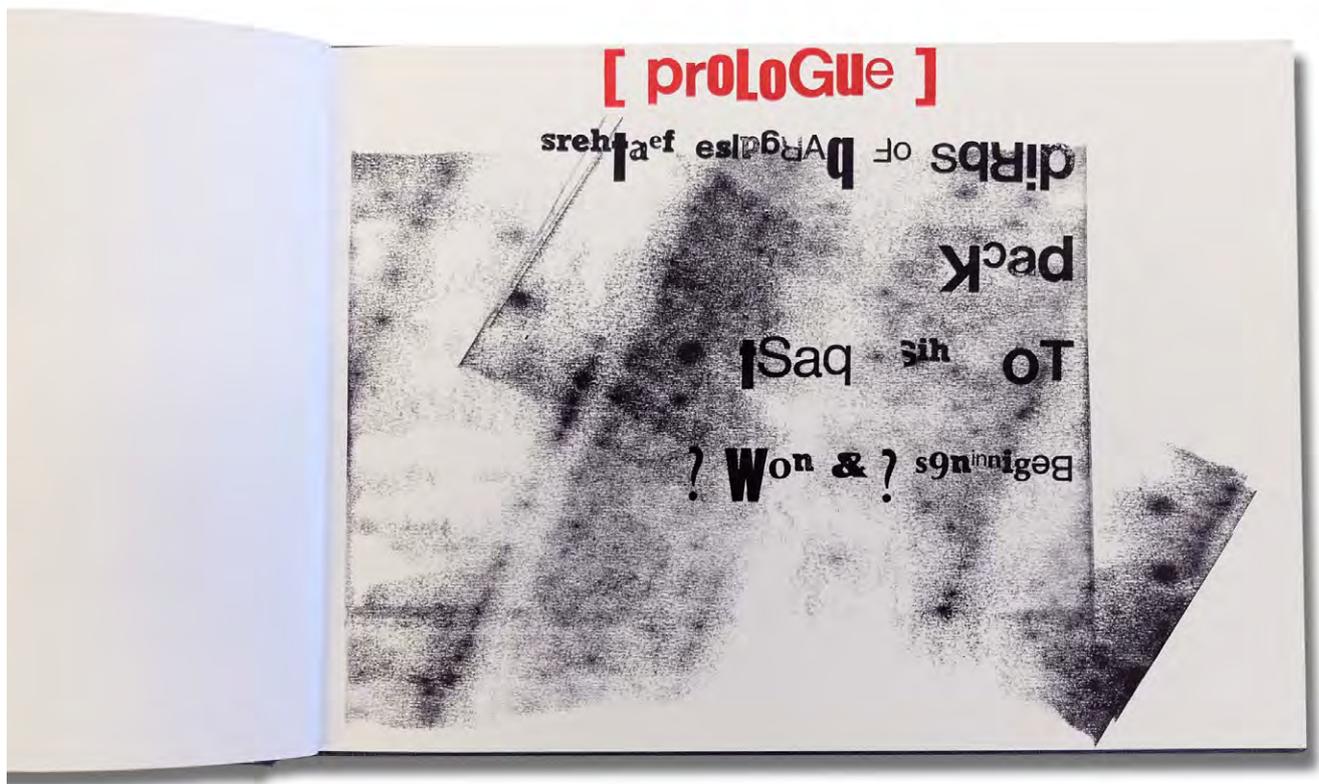
At this point in my research I rediscovered the writing of Jean-François Lyotard.⁵ Lyotard claimed that a central marker of a postmodern sensibility is a loss of faith in what he identified as 'the grand narratives.'⁶ This was part of the great Enlightenment Project. Such grand (or meta-) narratives are the overarching (or underlying) cultural stories with which we (Europeans), for centuries have projected ourselves into the future. They propose the image of an ongoing application of rational knowledge and progress, leading to greater and greater human liberation and perhaps even some kind of deliverance or salvation. But the credibility of these collective narratives, Lyotard claimed, has collapsed. Sadly, he concluded, there is little evidence that such rational progress is the case.⁷

I would argue that the overall shape of such grand narratives (with their ideas of progression, development and some sense of arrival) could serve as a loose definition of traditional narrative itself. Thus, to lose faith in the grand narrative, is largely to lose faith in the narrative itself as a valid cultural form.

Lyotard suggested that instead of these epic narratives, our real stories now are small, strange, fragmented, personal tales with particular application and meaning.⁸ He argued for a practice that returns us to 'the individual little narratives' that embrace their idiosyncratic



Ana Paula Estrada, *Memorandum*, 2016



Clyde McGill, *Seven Conjectures on Looking for Place*, 2016

variations and eccentricities of purpose.⁹ Although Lyotard was not talking about artists' books with all of this, it seemed to me that he might well have been.

For such a 'micro-narrative' might mean, for example, the imagining or inventing what happens in the corner of a barn in the Scottish countryside over an indefinite amount of speculative time. This is the core of the story in the artist's book *Chinese Whispers* by Telfer Stokes and Helen Douglas. Or it might mean the repeated and contemplative inspection of documents about the countless varieties of clouds in the skies of planet earth. This is what we find in the artist's book *Cloud Studies* by Helmut Völter. Or it might be the story that arises between the poetic notion of a wolfman and the musical experiments with letterpress print technology. This is the imagined and real story that arises in the artist's book *Execution* by Ken Campbell. The examples list from the artists' book archive is endless. In this way, the artist's book is arguably the archetypal postmodern book.

But our turning away from the conventional rendering of those grand narratives has allowed us to re-approach the big themes in a more personally philosophical manner. This potentially affords the artist's book a tremendous maturity. For in some of the small, idiosyncratic stories in artists' books we find a willingness to embrace the background uncertainty of existence, or ontological disquiet, that was appeased by those traditional grand narratives. We often even find a willingness to embrace uncertainty as subject matter. As I suggested, Julie Barratt's *Blair Athol Recut* confronts some of the primal, personal and social questions precipitated by human displacement.

Seven Conjectures on Looking for Place attempts, in a different way, to explore this sense of finding and having (or not) a place in the world. This is Clyde McGill's work as a 2015 Siganto Creative Fellow. This book is essentially a textual work, but the text is printed with variable-sized wood type and its placement, spelling and orientation is given an eccentric, visual treatment. Attempting to resolve these visual and semantic puzzles seems to be part of what it means to look for place.

In Conjecture#1, McGill declares 'I am place'. This double-page spread seems to say: 'I am this place, this texture, this expanse, this experience'. And this is followed, on the following pages, with 'I live here', and 'I love you'. Thereby McGill establishes from the outset the core equation that underpins the overall philosophical quest in this book: Self is Place is Life is Love is Place. The following conjectures expand this basic equation with a look into history, heroes, time and the imagination.

Amid its various philosophical adventures, there is a powerful underlying abstract visual story running through this book, which is the simple sensuality of the textures of ink on paper. This, perhaps, is the real place of the quest in the title. This is an example of an important dimension that we often find in artists' books: the immediate, sometimes visceral reading experience itself is the real story of the book. Such books can be very grounding in this way, and offer a sense of 'arrival', not in the grand-narrative moral sense, but as a return, or deliverance, back to the direct, material reading encounter.

As examples of some of the greatest experiments in the history of storytelling, it seems possible to me that artists' books are the evolutionary next step in reading and narrative. Artists' books often offer a story kind (a template of sensibility) that encourages a reader to come out of the usual childlike enthrallment to traditional story and to be a more conscious and collaborative maker of meaning, rather than remain a passive consumer of story.

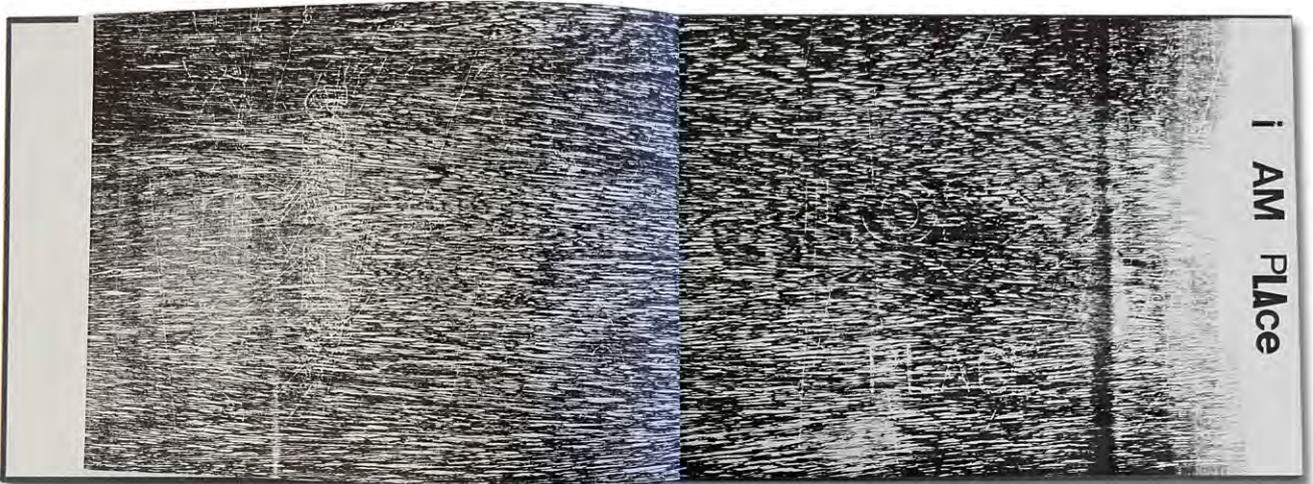
Considering this model of the narrative that we find in the artist's book, if narrative is what we choose to still call it, there may be few, simple happy-ever-afters from here on in. But what we get in its stead is far more rewarding.

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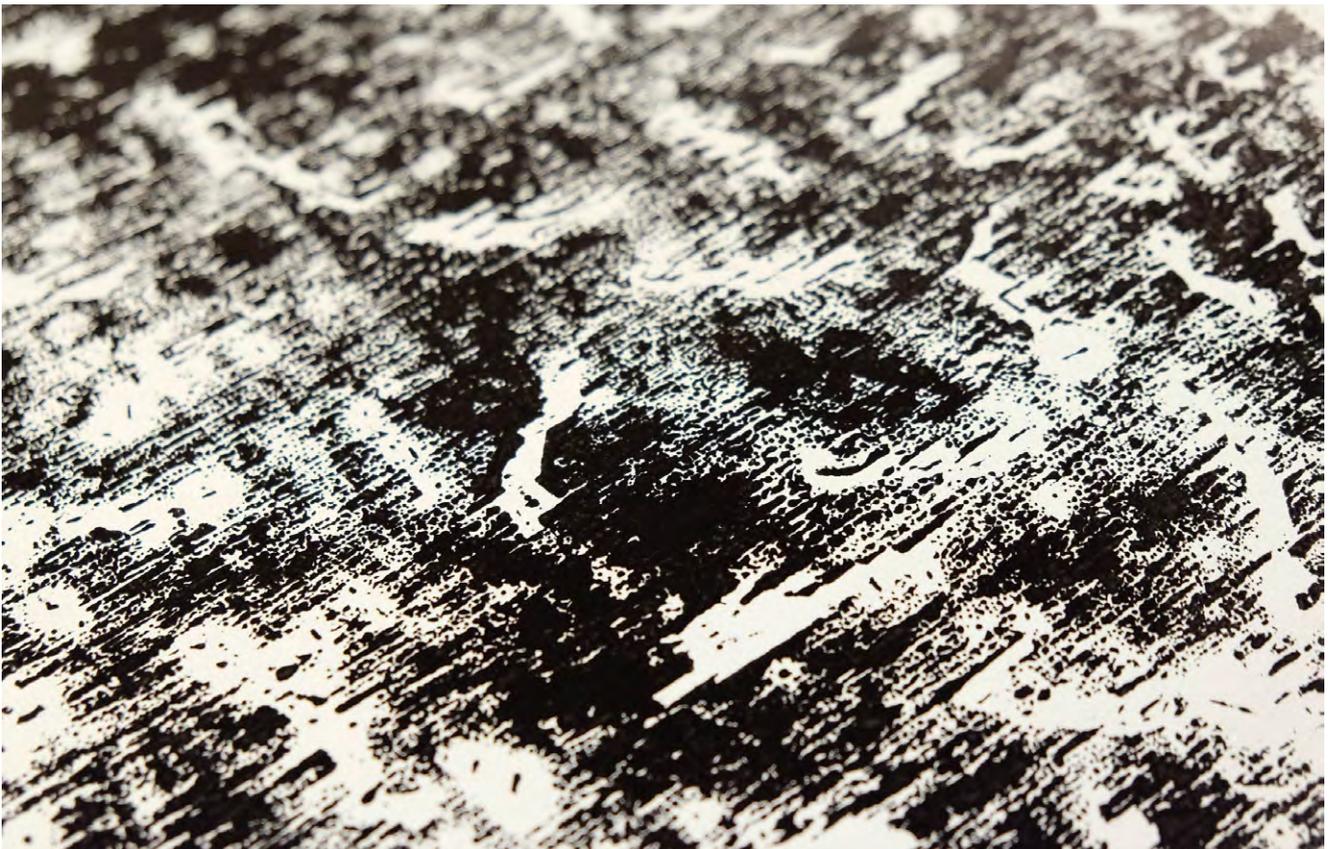
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Notes

1. Elena Lamberti, "Marshall McLuhan and the Modernist Writers' Legacy," in *At the Speed of Light there is Only Illumination, A Reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. John Moss and Linda M Morra, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004), 68/69
2. For more about this award-winning book, see: <https://jandavis.com.au/2015/12/26/solomon-turns-21/>
3. See Julie Barratt's blog: <http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ala/2015/07/24/blair-athol-recut/>



Clyde McGill, *Seven Conjectures on Looking for Place*, 2016



Detail: Clyde McGill, *Seven Conjectures on Looking for Place*, 2016

4. See Ana Paula's website: <http://anapaulaphotography.com.au/about-memorandum/>

5. Jean François Lyotard was one of the major French philosophical thinkers to promote the ideas of postmodernism in the 1980s.

6. Simon Malpas, *Jean-Francois Lyotard* London: Routledge, 2003, p25

7. Lyotard proposed our "incredulity toward metanarratives" in Jean-Françoise Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester Uni Press, 1984, p xxiv

8. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in Peter Brooker (edit and introduction) *Modernism/Postmodernism* Harlow, Pearson Education Limited 1992, p140

9. Simon Malpas, *Jean-Francois Lyotard* London: Routledge, 2003, p30

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